

Beware of Wolves!



Matthew 7:15–23

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You know, I don't see this as often as I used to but there have been times in my adult life when I have driven up to someone's property and they had the big sign saying, BEWARE OF DOGS. Now, I don't know about you, but if a property owner feels the need to post a sign telling me to beware of their dog, I probably should be aware of their dog. And at that point, I'm not thinking about them or about how beautiful their property is; I'm driving down the driveway looking for the dog. I don't know what you would do but I'll tell you what I do...I stop in the driveway, wait a few minutes, turn the truck off, and actually and give the dog time to reveal himself. But dogs don't always do that, so I wait for the person to come out of the house because I know they have a dog that they want me to be aware of. If they don't come out of the house, I have got a decision to make of whether to get out of the truck or not. If I get out of the truck and go to the porch, I start looking for the dog, and you can always hear them coming. When I hear the noise, I start wondering if it is a German

shepherd or a Rottweiler, but hoping it's a Chihuahua that I'm going to be dealing with. Imagine driving up on the church parking lot and seeing a big sign saying, BEWARE OF WOLVES. That would be strange, right? Now, what immediately should go through your mind if we put that sign on the church parking lot is why would they want us to beware of wolves? And the first thing I would want to remind us is who we are. According to the Bible, if we are followers of Jesus we are sheep, and sheep are prey animals. In the food chain, we are not the king we are at the bottom, and there are many animals that prey on us. One of the animals that love sheep is an animal called a wolf. Jesus, as He comes to the conclusion of His sermon on the mountain, warns His followers about wolves. So this morning, it's not going to be a popular subject; it's going to be a warning subject. Now, it's not my nature to like to speak about these kind of topics, but when you are a pastor who preaches through the Bible verse by verse, you can't skip this. Open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 7. I want you to see this title, "Beware of Wolves," not as a title to a sermon but a big billboard, a big sign, of Jesus warning us of the danger and the deception of wolves. As we read through verses 15–23, please hear the heart of Jesus.

Scripture

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

I want to acknowledge right up front that God and I talked this week, and at first, I thought this warning was out of order. I thought Jesus should have finished His sermon, given the invitation for us to follow Him, and then warn us. But it's not what He does, so I'm going to try to the best of my ability to preach this passage in its context. Jesus now, as He concludes His sermon, says to those on that mountain who are going to follow Him to beware of false prophets. Now, we understand from our study of the Old Testament that God called certain people to be prophets and they would prophesy God's message to His people. Moses, being in the line of the prophets, spoke about a prophet who would come after him speaking of Jesus. But he knew that before the Messiah came there would be other prophets, and he actually wanted the people to understand that not everyone who claimed to be a prophet would be a prophet. There would be some prophets who would be false. They would prophesy falsely and when they opened their mouths, they would not be speaking on behalf of God. We see a question about this in Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 21 and 22, "How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?" In other words, how do we know you *haven't* spoken to a prophet who says you spoke to him? Moses answers in verse 22, "...when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him." This was really simple — if someone made a prophecy, said something was going to happen and it didn't happen, then that guy is not a prophet. Real simple.

But some things aren't that black or white. By the time we get to the prophecy of Jeremiah where he is prophesying to the children of Israel that God is going to destroy the temple and take the southern kingdom into exile, there were prophets who were saying this wasn't true, that Jeremiah was overreacting, and this was a time of peace not a time of concern. So in Jeremiah 23:16–17, the Lord says, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.'"

Then, by the time we get to the New Testament, we understand from the day of Pentecost that there's going to be a radical change in prophecy. A prophet is not going to just speak about something that's going to happen in the future; now a prophet is going to take God's Word and announce it to God's people, and then he's going to announce that there's going to be consequence depending on your response to what God says is true. Now, here's what's amazing. When the day of Pentecost came and the Holy Spirit fell upon the church, Peter quoted the Old Testament book of Joel chapter 2 to say that what's happening now in the church is fulfilling what Joel talked about concerning the last days. One of the signs of us knowing we are in the last days, one of the signs of knowing that the church is filled with the Holy Spirit of God and we have been baptized with the Spirit is that prophecy will not just be reserved as a calling and a gift to man but that everyone in the church can have this gift — old men, young men, old women, young women, your servants, male or female. Throughout the book of Acts, we see ladies who actually had the gift of prophecy and they prophesied. But Jesus is going to give a warning that as followers of Christ there are going to be people who are going to say they are speaking on behalf of God and they are telling us God's truth, but what Jesus wants us to know that not all those prophets are genuine. They are not all true prophets. Some of them are false prophets.

The word for false here in the Greek language literally means they are lying prophets. What's coming out of their mouth, what's coming out of their life, you can't trust. It's opposite of truth. It's opposite of genuine. It's opposite of sincere. So Jesus is warning us about false prophets. Look at what He said about them — they are deceptive, what you see is not what you get; they are dressed in sheep's clothing. Meaning what? When you look at them they are going to look just like you, they are going to look like a sheep. And your first response to them is you are going to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Now, remember in Jesus' sermon — what's He been telling us about righteousness? We can't have a righteousness like the scribes and Pharisees have, a righteousness that just conforms to Law, outward conformity. What kind of righteousness does Jesus want us to have? He

wants us to have an inward righteousness. He wants us to be right with God, and then from that right relationship with God flows our outer righteousness. So we are not trying to conform to Law; we are trying to conform to the heart and person of Jesus Christ. So what do we know about these false prophets? Well, they have outer conformity — they look like a sheep. How do they look like sheep? You can put them in sheep clothing. What this is referring to is in the biblical days shepherds would wear sheep clothing, not to look like a sheep but to identify with the sheep as a shepherd. They had a sheep's skin that had been cured that still had the wool on it, and on a cool night they would put it on with that skin inward and the wool outward. So if you were approaching from a distance, you really couldn't tell the shepherd from the sheep. When he got really cold, that shepherd would turn that wool in and that skin out. The primary reason he wore the sheep's clothing was to stay warm. Jesus takes that picture and says be careful church, be careful follower, you are a sheep, you're a prey animal. Beware of the false prophet because even though he looks like you outwardly, tries to conform to some of the same standards you conform to, inwardly he or she is a ravenous wolf. It doesn't just say wolf, ravenous, fierce, destructive. It's the picture of a wolf preying on a sheep and he literally devours the sheep with his mouth. After taking the life of the sheep, using his paw and his mouth he literally tears it apart limb by limb until there's nothing left of the sheep. That's the picture. This blows my mind but it hurts my heart to know there are people who prey on and are out to destroy the sheep of God, and Jesus warns us about these people.

Now, I want you to see the context. I told you before that I originally thought this was out of order, that this should go after Jesus talking about the two builders, and that verses 21 and 23 should follow verse 14. But Jesus is the perfect teacher; He doesn't make mistakes. How dare I be a pastor and criticize Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. I can't do that. After wrestling with this and wrestling with this, here is what I believe. Let me keep this in context...As Jesus begins the conclusion to His sermon He tells us there are two gates — one is narrow and one is wide. Depending on which gate you enter, the way is different — one way is easy and the other way is hard. There are two different destinations depending on which

gate you go through — one destination is destruction, the other destination is life, eternal life. And, there are two different crowds of people — there are the few and there are the many. Now why, after telling us there are two different gates, would Jesus now warn us about false prophets, false teachers, false preachers, people whose messages are not true, meaning we cannot trust and we better not trust what they say to us? I think it is because the effect of their words on us is just like the effect of a wolf on a sheep. I think you get it. I think what Jesus trying to say is you better listen to me...There are just two gates, there are just two ways, there are just two destinations, and there are just two crowds...But there's going to be some people among you who you are going to think is church, who you are going to think are sheep, and they are going to contradict this message. And the contradiction of *their* message, primarily, is going to be that you can live the life you want to live and that life will not lead you to destruction because God is a God of love. He's not a God of wrath, He's not a God of justice, and He just wouldn't send somebody like you to Hell. He just wouldn't do that. False prophets, primarily, tell people "It's okay. There is really not a life of destruction. You are not really going to pay for what you do. It's okay, God understands." All of a sudden, it's not the narrow gate that's hard that leads to life; the wide gate does too.

Now, let's remember this. Kory ached this, if I can say that — what does it mean when you enter the narrow gate? It's hard. Why is it hard to enter the narrow gate? Why do just a few find it? It is because, ultimately, salvation is about you coming to the end of yourself and recognizing there is nothing you can do as a sinner to earn a right relationship with a holy God. That your only hope for salvation is to trust in the work of another, which is God's work in His Son, Jesus Christ, when He put Him on that cross to die for your sin, bear your eternal punishment, face the wrath of God, and be separated from the Father so that ultimately you could receive eternal life — and that eternal life not be something that happens in the future, but something that starts the moment you repent of your sins and put your faith and trust — and it changes your life. It's the hardest thing a sinner will ever do, and that's why most don't find this gate.

Do you remember that other gate? That other gate is a life that we didn't choose to enter. Mom, dad, got us through this gate, and this gate's wide, and this gate's easy. Why is this gate wide? Why is this gate easy? It is because entry through this gate is we receive a sin nature. I am so thankful that modern science is finally agreeing with what the Bible teaches, and that is there are some genetic things that we inherit from our parents that determine behavior! Praise God, science catches up with the Bible! But think about this — I have received some tendencies that I got from Adam and Eve, and it's just really easy for me to believe that's who I am. It's just really easy for me to say, "Well, if God made me this way, then this must be okay." Therefore, there's never a need to repent of being a sinner, or that particular sin. And somehow, the false teachers tell us that we can mingle all of this together because God is a God of love and there is no consequence, there is no destruction, eternally or presently, for the choices we make on how we want to live our life because, ultimately, all of us should have the right to choose.

I was in Brazil and one of my pastor friends sent me this article. It's rare that I can get things in Brazil, but this came upon my phone, "Historic Kentucky Church calls gay man as co-pastor," not California, not Chicago, not New York City, not Washington DC, it was Kentucky. That church had already gone down the road of saying a lady can pastor a church. Now, this church took another step alongside that lady to call a gay man to be pastor because this church wants to minister to part of the community that they feel the church has abandoned and does not minister to. Can I tell you how that breaks my heart? Not because the church called a gay man, but because the message from the pulpit of that church is you can choose a life of homosexuality, and marriage as a homosexual, and there is no consequence to you with God. Do any of us believe a church is going to call a gay man to lead the church and then tell the people in the church he's going to hell because of his lifestyle? There used to be a time when I or the staff could counsel folks who were struggling with that genetic tendency — and it is a genetic tendency that comes from Adam and Eve; it's sin nature — and if someone refused to listen, they would move to Louisville or Memphis to practice that lifestyle. Now, you can go down the road and found a church in Western Kentucky that says there is no eternal

destruction, God will not judge you if you practice this lifestyle. That there is no destruction that comes to you in this life right now if you choose this as a lifestyle, and you can still believe you are saved and pursue this life of sin. It breaks my heart to know that one of the most historic churches in our nation has a pastor who is running for a senate seat that he's already won in a special election in the state of Georgia, in the city of Atlanta, and his belief is it's okay for you, as a woman, to end the life of that baby in your womb. We are talking about the pastor of a historic Baptist church in our nation! We have denominations who are dividing because part of the denomination believes when you are born you can't look at the baby and say the baby is a boy or a girl — because gender is a choice that you choose; it's not something that's a part of God's plan and the birthing process!

Jesus warns us to beware of these false prophets, beware of these false teachers...and I want to go further to say beware of these false churches! They are not speaking God's Word! Yet some of us watch them on TV and you think it's okay when it's not. Please listen to me! I can warn you of what goes on in here, but I can't warn you of everything that goes on out there — but *Jesus* warns us about false teachings, false prophets, false prophecies, false preachers, false churches, that do not stand true to the two gates — one being narrow and the way hard. And it is hard...it's hard to denounce a sin tendency. Tell me you know that! Tell me you have been there! Tell me you have struggled with this! Tell me you have experienced the life change God brings to you that gives you victory over this! We could go on and on and on because that same church is going to tell you it's okay to gossip. That same church is going to tell you it's okay to cheat. Yes, it's easy for us pick out the one we are *not* doing, but that's not what Jesus does here. Even in your own life, you cannot believe you can continue to have a sinful lifestyle and a sinful tendency, no matter what that tendency is in your life, and still be right with God. That's why salvation leads to sanctification. That's why we in the church aren't judging, because every time we see this we understand what it reveals in us and that secret sin in our heart, in our life.

So, if these false prophets look like sheep but they are ravenous wolves, how do we know? Here is what Jesus is ultimately teaching — He says by their fruits you will know them. Then He switches to a tree analogy. He talks about you can't get a grape from thorn bush. I know that. You can't get a fig from a thistle. I know that. What is He trying to say? If you sat under a false teacher, if you sat under a false church, if you sat under a false prophet, it's a contradiction. A healthy tree can't bear bad fruit and a diseased tree can't bear good fruit, in other words, a healthy tree produces good fruit and a diseased tree produces bad fruit. Then Jesus comes in again and says by their fruits you shall recognize them. How do I recognize a false prophet? When the way they lead people does not lead them to salvation but it leads them to eternal damnation. You don't want to believe that's true, but it's true. The Bible is *clear* on the plan of salvation, and the Bible is *clear* on the way of sanctification. This isn't me warning you, this is Jesus warning us — He ends His sermon with this warning — because there are just two gates, just two ways, just two destinations, and just two crowds.

I really wish here that Jesus had said what the fruit was. Not everybody is going to agree me on what I think the fruit is, but basically, the fruit is their teaching and their lifestyle. God has given us His Word, and we base all our teachings on the Word of God; we cannot change them. God's Word talks about a lifestyle that comes out of someone who is a sheep of God. Please hear me...there are churches who teach that all you have to do to be saved is to say a sinner's prayer, and then once you say that sinner's prayer, it doesn't matter how you live your life...there is no disruption to you, you got eternal life. That's a lie. If you have really put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, there's a change of life that comes to you. That change of life is what gives evidence that you really are right with God.

Now, please understand there are some things that we can teach wrong, but it doesn't mean we are false teachers or false prophets. Can I be lighthearted here? Some of you know me. You can differ with me on Romans 7, but that doesn't mean you are a false prophet; it just means you are wrong about Romans 7. ☺ When it comes to Reformed Theology, you can be a five-pointer, unlike me, a four-pointer. It doesn't mean you

are a false prophet, but it just means you are wrong — you can believe that the rapture starts before the tribulation instead of after the tribulation, like I do. That doesn't mean you are a false prophet but it means you are wrong. Do you see that difference? There are some things we can disagree on because it doesn't affect salvation, but there are some things we must all agree on — and that is God is not going to let sinners who practice a lifestyle of sin into Heaven. Yes, the gate is narrow and not everybody finds it because it's hard. Hear me say this. The hardest thing you will ever do is to repent of that sin nature you received from Adam and Eve. It gets even harder when you have somebody telling you that it's okay...that it's not really separating from you from God...that it's not really bringing destruction upon you.

Please Church...let's beware of the false prophets. He didn't just talk about two trees; He talks about two testimonies. Look at verse 21, "Not everyone who says, 'Lord, Lord' is going to enter the Kingdom of Heaven..." Can you imagine being a teacher, or a preacher, or a pastor of a church, and you are claiming 'Lord, Lord,' and on the Day of Judgment God says to you that you aren't going to enter the Kingdom of Heaven? It breaks my heart to think that some of us sitting here maybe saying, 'Lord, Lord,' but we are not going to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. See, you can not only be a false prophet, you can be a false professor. You can say you know something that you really don't know — and that is Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

Who does Jesus say is going to enter the Kingdom of Heaven? *He who does the will of Him who sent me.* Now, I want to make sure we don't misunderstand this. Don't slip into a works-based salvation. What does it mean to do the will of God? Well, let's turn to Jesus' words in John chapter 6:26–29, "Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on Him God the Father has set His seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." So, what's the work of

God? God wants us to believe what? In Him whom He sent? Who did He send? He sent Jesus. So, what does God want us to do to do the work of God? He wants us to believe in Jesus. Got it?

Now, let's go to verses 39 and 40, "And this is the will of Him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise Him up on the last day." Please hear this. The will of God for you is not just to look on the Son, but to believe in the Son. To come to that place where you repent of being a sinner, put your faith and trust in Jesus, receive the new nature of God, and then God promises you that on the last day Jesus is going to raise you up. That is what it means to do the will of God — not to profess with your mouth only, but to believe in your heart. To believe in your heart means you commit your life to Him, you quit trusting in you and your decisions and you trust totally in His finished work on the cross for you, and that's hard. It's not easy. There will be few that go this way — and many are going to go the other way.

The last thing...look at verses 22–23 in Matthew 7, "On that day [the Day of Judgment] many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" There are going to be people on the Day of Judgment who are going to cry out... *God, did not do all of this for you!* He is going to say... *You know my name, but I don't know yours. You know me, but I don't know you.* How do we reconcile this? How do I reconcile this? Do you realize how hard it is to be a pastor in this day and age? To stand for the truth of God's Word and to break people's hearts? To see sin devastate families? See, on the day of judgment what people are going to go back to is works... *God, didn't I do this for you, didn't I do that for you?* It boils down to, where is our trust? Our trust is in us. Our trust is in *me* making the right choice about my life; it's about faith in *me*. If your faith is in you, of what you do for God to make you right with Him, He doesn't know you. The ones He knows are the ones who abandon faith and

trust in themselves, don't make their own choice but let Him make His choice for us, and we reveal His kind of life not our kind of life.

Can you imagine, on the Day of Judgment, God looking at somebody and saying I don't know you? So, can I just say this? I believe it's more important for God to know us than it is for us to know Him. You know whether or not He knows you. Does He know you? Doesn't this scare you a little bit? It scares me a lot. I haven't had this happen in a long time, but I have had people ask me what would I do on the Day of Judgment if God sends me to hell. I say, "I'm going to hell. God has the right to send me to hell if God wants to send me to hell." What they are really trying to ask me is what am I trusting in? Here is what I tell people, and I mean this with all my heart — if I stand before God on the Day of Judgment and you are all there and you are going to see this, if God sends me to hell and says, "I never knew you," you are not going to hear me say...*but I pastored Hardin Baptist Church. I gave up being a farmer so that I could pastor a church because that's what you wanted me to do.* You are not going to hear me tell Him about all the mission trips I went on. You are not going to hear me tell Him about all the late night out conversations I had trying to help you. You aren't going to hear me bring up any of that stuff. Do you know what I would say to God if God sends me to hell? I'd say, "God, that's fine but just know I'm going to hell believing in your Son, Jesus Christ..." because I believe in God's Son, Jesus Christ. Now, is a believer in Jesus Christ going to go to hell? No. Am I going to hell? No. The reason I believe in Jesus is because God knows me, and my relationship is not one sided. There are a lot of you that think you know LeBron James, you think you know Tom Brady because you know all their stats, but you don't really know them because they don't know you. Does God know you? Have you seen the change in your life? Are you a slave of righteousness, or are you a slave of sin?